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SUBJECT: PHILIPPINES TO HOLD FIRST NATIONWIDE VILLAGE ELECTIONS
SINCE 2002

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: Nationwide village council elections will take place on October 29 for the first time since 2002. More than 335,000 seats are at stake. These elections do not directly involve national political parties, but the newly elected village chairpersons will be in a good position to control modest resources and influence local voting in future elections. There have been only 13 election-related fatalities throughout the 42,000 village districts so far, suggesting that the final figure will likely be lower than the 75 deaths recorded in the 2002 elections. Simple vote-counting procedures should mean that election results will be available more quickly and could decrease vote fraud compared to previous national elections. The Mission's election observation efforts will include the dispatch of political staff to polling places in Metro Manila and an extensive USAID training program in Mindanao. Indicative of the very local nature of these elections, there has been minimal campaigning thus far and press interest has also been low. END SUMMARY.

BARANGAY: THE BASIC POLITICAL UNIT

¶2. (U) The village and neighborhood districts, or barangays, are the smallest political units in the Philippine system. Their populations can range from a minimum of 2,000 in rural areas to over 100,000 in urban areas. Councilors manage day-to-day government affairs, basic infrastructure projects, and some services. Their political significance is enhanced when councilors - and especially the chairpersons, or captains - are able to deliver votes for candidates seeking higher office.

¶3. (U) Approximately 335,000 youth councilors, aged 15 to 18, will also be elected on October 29. There are 3.1 million youths registered to vote in these separate elections. The positions are intended to raise the profile of youth concerns and hone the leadership potential of the younger generation.

¶4. (U) According to the Commission on Elections, voter turnout on October 29 could be slightly higher than in the national midterm elections in May. The Commission predicts a turnout rate greater than 75%, which would surpass the 73% of the May 2007 vote. There are 51 million voters registered for the barangay elections, which is more than the 45.5 million who registered in the May elections. The difference may be due to simultaneous youth council elections or heightened interest in issues closer to home.

NATIONAL INTEREST AND INVOLVEMENT

¶5. (U) Political parties are banned from supporting campaigns at the barangay level. However, it is clear that these elections matter to national politicians, many of whom look to barangay captains as their front-line soldiers in turning out the vote for congressional and presidential polls. The timing and format of the local elections have also been subject to Congressional tinkering.

For example, barangay councils are supposed to serve just three years, and the last round of local elections should have been held in 2005. But the Congress delayed the election, arguing that it came too quickly on the heels of the 2004 presidential and congressional votes, and reset the election date to 2007.

¶6. (U) Congress almost delayed the elections again this year, as the House of Representatives passed a bill to postpone the poll until 2009, but the Senate defeated the bill, noting that candidates had already filed for office and the election commission had spent funds to prepare for the vote, sitting village officials had already served for five years and many of the youth councilors were no longer so youthful. A former congresswoman stated publicly that congressmen needed time, following the May elections, to replenish their war chests, which would enable them to support handpicked barangay captains. Unlike representatives, who are elected in local districts, senators are elected in at-large national contests and would not benefit from such a move.

QUICKER PROCESS THAN NATIONAL ELECTIONS

¶7. (U) The winners will take office on November 30, and the Commission on Elections has until November 1 to proclaim winners, if there are no challenges. Most of the winners will be determined on the same day, since vote tallies need not be re-tabulated at higher levels, as is the case with municipal, provincial, and congressional elections.

VOTING CHALLENGES

¶8. (U) Election Commission officials believe that the simple vote-counting procedures will both speed the issuance of final

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results and reduce opportunities for fraud, because cheating often occurs through "vote padding" as votes get tabulated at each successive level during national polls. However, the presence of observers will be reduced compared to national elections.

¶9. (U) To help remedy the lack of observers, USAID has supported training of Filipino observers in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). The Coalition for ARMM Electoral Reform (Citizens CARE) is a consortium of 24 Muslim nongovernmental organizations that USAID has worked with, through the International Foundation for Election Systems, to support improvements in the electoral process. During the upcoming elections, Citizens CARE will field some 3,000 volunteers to monitor the voting and counting of votes with coverage in 710 barangays throughout the ARMM. This training advances the USG's larger goal of supporting freer and fairer elections in the Philippines by improving election processes and building the capacity of locals to do election monitoring.

¶10. (U) The Philippine National Police have so far recorded 17 election-related violent incidents, resulting in 13 deaths. This compares with 114 deaths associated with the national elections carried out in May, and some 75 fatalities that took place during the last local elections in 2002 - 30 of whom were candidates. A police task force has been formed to reduce violence, and a ban on carrying guns in public is in place until November 13.

¶11. (U) Post will follow up with election results as they become available.

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